

shaking up all our doubting bones by xxcaribbean

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Summary:

There are a lot of things Steve is self-conscious about, and there are a lot of things he isn't. The former is what he feels this time, his lack of mental dexterity a sore spot he doesn't want provoked.

shaking up all our doubting bones

Author's Note:

based on [this](#) prompt: billy is bad at math but incredibly great at english and writing. steve is working on his college admission essay (too late for this semester but he can at least get a headstart on early admissions next semester) and off handedly mentions this to billy and, out of curiosity, billy asks to see it. steve doesn't think much as he hands billy his essay but he does end up asking billy his thoughts on it and unlike nancy (who sugar coated her feelings a bit), billy is completely honest - the essay is trash and makes no sense. instead of fucking around that night, billy and steve spend the whole night trying to write a new essay together that'll wow the admissions board

song title is from good as gold by the click five

Steve curses under his breath, twisting the pencil around in his hand. The eraser flies across the page, sprinkles of excess rubber shavings leaving his desk a mess. It shouldn't be this difficult to write, shouldn't take him goddamn hours to make sense of a language he grew up speaking. But it is; the words don't come to him so easily, knowing this is something akin to permanent. Sure, he can erase until he rips right through the paper, but it won't change the fact that as soon as the lead touches the slip, his brain goes blank, and he feels a little too stupid to even bother trying.

"What's that?"

Quickly, Steve covers his paper with his hand, a loud smack against the wood. He hadn't known Billy was awake, hadn't heard a noise from the bed until it was too late.

Steve bites his lip, wondering if it'd be too obvious to smush it into a ball before throwing it away. The paper is dull now, gray and white and unfamiliar from his original scribbles. He's made a mess of the

page, not good enough now for a submission, as if it was ever good enough to begin with.

“Something I’m working on,” he says and hopes that Billy will leave it at that. There are a lot of things Steve is self-conscious about, and there are a lot of things he isn’t. The former is what he feels this time, his lack of mental dexterity a sore spot he doesn’t want provoked. Steve knows he’s not been smart about a lot of things, struggled with some classes more than others, and he thinks that maybe it’s really his fault for not trying hard enough despite the numbers and letters mixing no matter how hard he’s willed it to stop.

“Something important?” Billy asks from the bed. Steve glances at him, mere inches away from the chair he sits in. There’s a mess of curls sticking out from under the covers, two eyes blinking back at him with laziness while his nose remains covered most likely due to the chilliness in the air.

“No, it’s-” He shrugs, not having the heart to lie but also too distraught to bring attention to his misgivings. The joke’s on him though because Billy reads him like a goddamn book – the irony – and it makes him even more uncomfortable under such scrutiny. “It’s really nothing. I thought I had some time to rewrite this.”

“For what?”

Steve’s lips thin, tongue flicking out to wet them. He’s reluctant, at a crossroads because what he has is a mess of a college application paper staring back at him, taunting him for all the things he isn’t and might never be. Steve’s always been good at being decently cool, knows his sports, and maybe it’s easier for him to figure out equations involving numbers.

But this is writing, and it’s the only thing that matters out in that big old world, particularly if he ever has any desire to get the fuck out of town. Sure, money might buy him a spot or two, but it taints his stomach with unease thinking how little he’d deserve that kind of reward if he hadn’t worked for it.

“College application,” he replies simply, can’t take his eyes off the desk and the torturous stationary that mocks every fiber of his being.

“It’s a lost cause.”

Setting the pencil down, Steve picks up his words without any delicacy involved. With every intention to crumble it up, he pauses when Billy shuffles out from under the covers with a single grabby hand that makes Steve arch a brow. “You’re not looking at this.”

Billy’s eyes narrow, reaching forward just a little more until he’s got Steve’s paper in between two fingers. “You’re sure?”

Steve sighs and lets go, lets a shirtless Billy fall back onto his bed like he owns the damn thing while he slouches in his chair. The two of them have been through enough not to be embarrassed of judgment from one another, but his toes curl against the cold floor, and maybe his heart picks up a little speed as Billy settles down to read the absolute trash that’s become the bane of Steve’s existence for the past several weeks.

“Listen,” he starts, fingers curling into the palm of his hands, nails digging into the flesh. “It’s not worth the read, really. I can’t- I’ve never-”

Billy only hums, and Steve rolls his eyes at the fact that he can’t speak now. So, he leaves it at that, let’s fate take its course while he suffers in silence, holding his breath on an exhale.

It takes all of five minutes before the staleness in the room dissipates, Billy pursing his lips in thought while Steve’s stomach twists into fucking knots. “Nancy said-”

Billy glances at him, eyebrows rising of their own accord. “Oh yeah?” he questions, the annoyance clear as day; he’s never been fond of the girl, especially not after Steve’d randomly let on how he’d has his heart broken after a few too many beers.

He’d also questioned Billy and asked him not to break his heart, too, but that’s neither here or there, and Steve doesn’t have the time nor patience to deal with the flush of his cheeks when he thinks about it. Curse his body’s lack of patience with alcohol, and curse his inability not to be a Chatty Cathy in the most inopportune moments.

“Yes, she said-”

Billy snorts, honest-to-god releases that sound in the midst of Steve’s feelings of inadequacy. “Good thing I don’t give a shit about what she says.”

And that’s certainly not what Steve was expecting.

Furrowing his brow, he stares at Billy, trying to gauge whether he’s really fucking with him or not. Sometimes it’s so hard to tell, what with those goddamn eyes and those lips and how eager Billy is to give him a smirk when he least expects it.

“She’s not wrong, though,” he counters because Nancy’s comments sure as shit didn’t help his confidence. And it’s not like he desperately needed the compliments and for her to lie to him about what he’d attempted, but it was still a let down knowing he tried and failed. What’s worse is that he still doesn’t know how to correct it.

“Did she tell you it was shit?” Billy turns in bed, lying on his side, paper still nestled between his fingers. He glances back and forth between Steve and what’s left of his writing before he gives up waiting for Steve to reply. “Because it is; your thoughts are all over the place.”

Steve lets out a frustrated growl and slouches even further into his chair. “Thank you, captain obvious. I know that, which is why I was trying to fix it.” Immediately, the anger deflates. Like Nancy, he can’t fault Billy either, and deep down, he knew he’d get an honest response. Though, Steve’s not sure if he prefers the way Nancy handled it or the bluntness that comes with Billy Hargrove.

“Look, you’re on the right track.”

“Don’t flatter me, asshole.”

Billy rolls his eyes, but he keeps Steve pinned with his gaze. “You just need some reorganization, make it more seamless.”

“I swear to god if you’re fucking with me-”

“I’m not,” Billy replies, voice rough as it lowers. It makes Steve blink

and reevaluate whether he was raising his voice out of resentment of sorts, the apathy he has for this conversation overshadowing his real feelings of defeat.

But Billy looks as serious as he can be, playfulness set aside for something much more raw. It stirs familiarity in Steve's chest, like an old memory playing on the backdrop of a warm summer night. It coddles him like a blanket, that look, full of genuine care, and rather than it startling Steve, he wraps himself up in Billy's ability to graze the line between truthfulness and tenderness just when Steve needs it the most.

"If you want," the other boy begins, gaze fluttering down to the floorboards, "I can help you."

And now the tables have turned, so slowly and casually, Steve almost misses it. Billy looks just as nervous as Steve had felt, like his offer might not be well received nor appreciated. But Steve, god, does something inside his chest flip: most likely his heart, if he could guess. It dances in waves, like a soft breeze caressing the flowers. "Do you want to?" he poses because Steve has to know if Billy is really willing to take on a task like that, through the grievances and thoughts that encompass Steve's inability to communicate. "I'm not very good at it; we might be here awhile."

And well, that brings up another point of contention: for how long is Billy willing to stand his presence until he abandon's all resolve and leaves Steve scrambling for some semblance of coherency.

"Steve," he hears, tone falling to the depths of a warning. "Let me help you."

Reluctantly, Steve nods, not willing to push this into an unproductive argument. Instead, he reaches for a random book, rolling the pencil he'd forgotten about in between his fingers. "Move over, then."

Ungracefully, he clambers onto the bed, Billy huffing as an elbow and a knee knocks against his bones. Steve doesn't settle until there's a pillow behind his back, pressed against the wall while the rest of his body casually lounges across Billy's lower half. "Okay there, princess?"

Steve bites the inside of his cheek, refuses to acknowledge the heat crawling up his neck and onto his cheeks because he knows how distracting that gets; not just for Billy, himself included. "I'm good now. My ass wasn't havin' it much longer on that chair."

"I'm sure it wasn't," Billy says, slowly smiling like he's got a secret or two to kill. He doesn't say much else after, but he does reach for the book Steve has in his hand, using it as a solid source to write on. Reluctantly, Steve hands over the pencil, eraser pitiful in its shape.

Seconds later, Billy's scribbling shit down, and as curious as Steve is, he doesn't look. It's hardly from wanting to keep the momentum of surprise and more so his lack of restraint when it comes to criticism on his end. "I didn't know you liked writing," he says curiously, not remembering whether Billy had previously shared a love of language with him or not; though Steve is certain he'd remember something quant like that, didn't question Billy's ability in school and whether he remained true to the stereotype that all the pretty ones were idiots.

No, that was Steve, and maybe somewhere deep down he'd be jealous if it wasn't for the amount of appreciation curling along the length of his chest.

"I don't," is Billy's reply, though. It's quick from concentration, but still as sharp as a knife as if Steve's stumbled upon a subject Billy isn't interested in entertaining.

"Oh," he breathes because well, if Billy is shit at this too, then he supposes this entire session is a lost cause. "You know what you're doing, then?" But as soon as he asks it, Steve regrets it, winces at the sound of his own voice and the lack of assurance he should have in the one person who'd willingly offered their time and their help.

The pencil stops moving, and Steve suspects that maybe Billy will climb out of the comfort of his bed, leaving Steve the asshole and with a foot in his mouth.

Rather, Billy seems to space out for a second, like the paper and the book and Steve aren't right in front of him, like they're worlds away from Steve's near empty house, to a place where Billy doesn't know a

Steve or the small town of Hawkins, Indiana. "I'm sorry," he begins, wishing he could slap himself upside the head for being a dick.

But he doesn't get much more out because Billy is countering his apology with a heavier statement that leaves Steve both breathless and in awe.

"My mother," Billy says, almost randomly if Steve hadn't known better, hadn't understood the context underneath the tone. It drills so deep, the silence that follows, a standstill and confusing. Steve tries to read Billy as much as he can, particularly in such a moment when the boy beneath him is crossing the line of the unequivocal into uncharted territory.

So, Steve doesn't know what to say, lost in both a detail left unclear and how Billy blinks away a new shine to his eyes. It's like he expects Steve, so suddenly, to nag him until he cracks further, right down the middle until nothing is left but mushy innards that can't be stitched back together with titillated words. Which, in all honesty, Steve does have that power, has a magical way of slithering under Billy's skin without trying too hard. Those wounds reopening something fierce, debris breaking loose the point where it makes Billy re-examine parts of himself he'd long forgotten.

And Steve never means to pry like so, tends to wade in the water until Billy drags him farther in, down a rabbit hole filled with guilt and despair.

So this little revelation, a stumbling block Steve did not, and had never, anticipated is there for the taking. And he's curious; god is he curious about every part of Billy he doesn't know: the good, the bad, and everything in between, but some things are meant to be left alone. Steve may not be very good at reading between the lines, or reading in general really, but he knows Billy, and he knows the basis of what makes him tick.

"She loved literature," Billy says softly under the dim glow of sunlight that filters through the blinds in Steve's room. His fingers tap against the book beneath his hands, eyes not yet filled to the brim with tears, but glassy and distant like he's in another time, another world far away from what his life has become.

Steve thinks he can picture it, maybe, a young boy too wild and hyped up on candy every Halloween, climbing trees in the woods near his house, accumulating scrapes and bruises his mother kissed away. A much gentler Billy takes over his mind, and he wonders if Billy misses that kid, if he misses that life and all the promises it held for him until it took away the one thing Billy cherished the most.

“What was her favorite?” he asks instead, would rather not reveal how deep his affection goes. It’s already vulnerable, and Steve partly regrets pulling out his paper to look it over now, not quite sure if he made a mistake in unleashing memories of a happier time on Billy’s part.

Just slightly, Billy turns his head, finally glancing up from the parallel lines turned baby blue. Upset has never been a good look on Billy, and he’s grateful that that’s not what this is. It’s familiar, those occasions when Billy recalls the nuances he’d left behind in favor of anger and torment. Similar to a setting sun, the pinks and oranges mixing together with the blue from the ocean, designed for a snapshot and a brushstroke until Steve almost snorts at the simplicity. Doesn’t everyone believe that? Majestic as it is, humans have little ability to steer clear of what they already know, and this is no exception.

“I think-” is the voice that breaks through his thoughts, and when Steve studies Billy’s face, it’s all changed again; his demeanor, the depths of his eyes, the crease between his brows like he’s struggling to find something that just isn’t there. Distressed, Steve thinks, as he reaches forward, curling delicate fingers around Billy’s wrist because he knows that’ll get his attention.

It does, and Billy gives a soft smile, emotions fading by the second. “I don’t think I remember anymore,” he says.

Steve doesn’t miss the desolation, the acidity of what that statement means, what it’s dredged up. For the first time in quite awhile, Steve doesn’t know what to do and doesn’t know how to comfort a loss he’d never been apart of. There’d hardly been any rules between them to begin with, each moment a stepping stone together, building boundaries together, and Steve doesn’t have the heart to make that a thing they must do right now; it’s much too soon.

Alternatively, Steve finds the end of a curled piece of hair resting between Billy's shoulder and neck, twirling it around his finger and letting it fall into a ringlet against his skin. "Will you read to me?" he proposes, wondering if this compromise will be enough for today. If Steve cannot have Billy's memoir, then he will find another, bringing forth an interest he believes Billy might've forgotten he could care about.

"If you want me to."

Steve nods and doesn't say another word, lets Billy fall back into writing, erasing, and posing questions when he needs the answers. For now, it's Steve's turn to dwell on his misgivings, and it's then that he realizes exactly why Billy refused to work on his.

There's a time and a place for everything, and even in their shortcomings, everyone gets their turn. Today is for Steve and Steve alone, and if he thinks too much on it, he knows it'll leave him breathless.

Instead, Steve thinks about how much he'd like to kiss Billy, leave him just as senseless as he feels. But he waits, he waits a few minutes in this moment where Billy's voice cocoons him in encouragement and prompts him for details that expose the foundation of his very being.

And by the end of it, even if he may not have a full essay yet, Steve brings his own encouragement to the table, discarding the paper and falling into a natural ease that comes so easily when it's just the two of them together.